

**Remarks by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of Cuba
On the 10th anniversary of Hugo Chavez's first visit to Cuba**

at the Karl Marx theater on December 14, 2004. at a ceremony to present the Order of "Carlos Manuel de Céspedes" to Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias, President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Dear brother Hugo Chavez, president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela;

Dear members of the large and prestigious Venezuelan government delegation accompanying him;

Dear friends present at this ceremony;

Dear guests:

In order to know who Hugo Chavez is, you need to remember what he said in the speech he gave at the Great Hall in the University of Havana exactly ten years ago today, on December 14, 1994.

I have selected some of the things he said. Although it might seem that they are rather extensive, you will find them full of revolutionary content and spirit.

When he mentioned the fact that I had met him at the airport, he said, showing incredible modesty, *"When I had the enormous but pleasant surprise of being met at the Jose Marti International Airport by Fidel himself, I said to him, 'I don't deserve this honour, I hope that I shall deserve it one day in the months and years to come'. I say the same thing to you, dear fellow Cubano-Latin Americans: One day we hope to come to Cuba to offer our help, to offer each other mutual support in a Latin American revolutionary project, steeped as we have been for centuries in the idea of a Hispanic-American, Latin-American, Caribbean continent integrated into the single nation that we are.*

"We are on our way to this goal, and as Aquiles Nazoa said of José Martí, we feel we belong to all eras and to all places and we move like the wind after that seed which fell here one day and here, in fertile ground, sprouted and grew tall like we always said it would – and I am not just saying this now here in Cuba, because I am in Cuba and because, as we say in my land, on the Venezuelan plains, I feel safe and supported. We used to say the same thing in the Venezuelan army before we were insurrectionary soldiers; we said it in Venezuelan drawing rooms and military schools: 'Cuba is a beacon of Latin American dignity and we have to look on her as such'. There is no doubt that interesting things are happening in Latin America and the Caribbean; there is no doubt that our famous poet and writer, who belongs to this America of ours, Pablo Neruda, was utterly right when he wrote that Bolívar awakens every hundred years when the people awaken.

"There is no doubt that we are in an era of peoples awakening, of resurrection, of strength and hopes; there is no doubt, Mr. President, that the wave whose arrival you are

announcing or announced and continue to announce in that interview which I have referred to earlier, A Grain of Corn, can be felt, its presence felt throughout Latin America.

"Weary of the existing level of corruption, we were sufficiently daring to found a movement in the ranks of the Venezuelan national army, and we swore to dedicate our lives to building a revolutionary movement and to the revolutionary struggle in Venezuela and now in the Latin American context.

"We began to do this in the year marking the bicentennial of Bolivar's birth. But we can see that next year is the centenary of the death of Jose Marti, we can see that the coming year is the bicentennial of the birth of Marshall Antonio Jose de Sucre, we can see that the coming year is the bicentennial of the rebellion and death of the Afro-Venezuelan, Jose Leornado Chirinos on the coast of Coro, in Venezuela, the land, by the way, of Antonio Maceo's forebears.

"Time calls to us and drives us; this, there is no doubt, is the time to walk down new paths of hope and struggle. We are engaged in doing that, dedicating ourselves now to our revolutionary labour in three basic areas which I am going to take the liberty of summarizing for you so as to invite you to exchange ideas with us, so as to invite you to forge ties of unity and of labour, of building something concrete.

"In the first place, we are determined to raise an ideological flag that is relevant to and beneficial for our land of Venezuela, for our Latin American lands: the Bolivarian flag. But, as we undertake this ideological work of reassessing history and the ideas that were born in Venezuela and on this continent two hundred years ago, we plunge into history in search of our roots, and we have designed and put before the Venezuelan and international public the ideas of that Simon Bolivar who called for Latin American union in order to oppose a developed nation as a kind of counterbalance to the North's ambitions, a north which was already beginning to loom over our Latin American lands with its claws unsheathed; the ideas of that Bolivar, who, almost from his grave, already in Santa Marta said: 'Soldiers take up the sword to defend social guarantees;' the ideas of that Simon Bolivar who said that the best system of government is that which bestows the greatest amount of happiness on its people, the greatest amount of political stability and social safety.

"This deeply-embedded root, this Bolivarian root which has been joined by time and by history itself to the Robinsonian root, taking as its inspiration the name of Samuel Robinson or that of Simon Rodriguez, whom very few Latin Americans know because we were told when we were very little: 'Bolivar, the teacher'. And that's where he remained, as if stigmatized by history, the eccentric madman, wandering like the breeze through the countries of Latin America and died at a ripe old age, Simon Rodriguez called on Americans from the southern lands to make two revolutions: the political and the economic revolution. That Simon Rodriguez who called on people to build a model of a social economy, a model of a people's economy, who bequeathed, as a kind of challenge to us, and appropriate for any moment Latin America might face, the idea that Latin

America could not continue in its servile imitation of others but that it had to be original and he called on us to invent or fall by the wayside. That old man, mad according to the bourgeoisie of his time, who wandered about when already old and abandoned gathering abandoned children, and who said , 'Children are the building blocks of the future republican building, come hither and polish the building blocks so that this building may be solid and luminous'!"

"We, as soldiers, are engaged in that search, and today we are more and more convinced of the need for the Venezuelan army to return to what it once was: a people's army, an army to defend what Bolivar called the social guarantees. That would be the first element in a really relevant effort, Comandante; to consolidate this ideological work, these two names, Bolivar and Marti, as a tool for lifting the spirits and the pride of Latin Americans.

"Another element in our effort, and for this we have to strengthen our ties with the peoples of Latin America, is our organizational work. When we were in jail we got our hands on many documents about how the Cuban people went about organizing themselves after the triumph of the Revolution, and we are determined to organize an immense social movement in Venezuela: the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200. And, what is more, we are calling for the creation of the National Bolivarian Front this next year, we are calling on students, peasants, native peoples, on those of us soldiers who are no longer in the army, on intellectuals, workers, fishers, dreamers, on everybody to build this front, a huge social front which can take on the challenge of transforming Venezuela.

"In Venezuela no one knows what might happen at any moment. We, for example, who are coming up to an election year, 1995 – in one year's time, in December, there will be more elections in Venezuela – illegal, illegitimate elections, that will be marked by abstentions – you won't believe this – of on average 90 percent; in other words, 90 percent of Venezuelans won't cast a vote, they don't believe in what politicians say, they believe in almost no political party.

"This year our hope is that, with the Bolivarian Movement, with the National Bolivarian Front, we can polarize Venezuela. The people who take part in the electoral process – there are some honest people who do, people whom we respect, it's the electoral process we don't believe in – that's one pole; and the other pole, the one we are going to nourish, to push and reinforce is the demand coming from the streets, from the people, calling for elections to a National Constituent Assembly to redefine the republic's deepest foundations, which are falling apart; Venezuela's legal foundations, its political foundations, its economic foundations, its moral foundations even, are at rock bottom, and that's something you can't fix with band-aids.

"Bolivar said: 'Political gangrene cannot be cured with palliatives' and Venezuela is totally and utterly riddled with gangrene. A green mango will ripen, but a rotten mango never ripens; the seed of a rotten mango must be saved and planted so that a new plant

may grow. That is happening in Venezuela today. There is no way the system can cure itself.'

"In Venezuela we do not reject armed struggle, there are still – and the polls taken by the government itself say so – more than 80 percent of the Venezuelan military who have a favourable opinion of us, in the army, the navy and the air force and the National Guard.

"In spite of all this, in our country we have strength and, in addition to all of that, we have an extremely high percent of Venezuelans on our side, especially, my dear friends, that 60 percent of Venezuelans – this is something else you are not going to believe – who live in a critical state of poverty.

"It's unbelievable but it's true: in 20 years in Venezuela more than \$200 thousand million just evaporated. So, where are they? President Castro asked me. In the foreign bank accounts of almost everyone who has been in power in Venezuela, civilians and soldiers, who filled their pockets, protected by the power they held.

"We have had an amazingly positive impact on this overwhelming majority of Venezuelans and you can understand that, with these two forces behind us, we are prepared to give all we have for a much needed change in Venezuela. This is why we have not ruled out using the weapons of the people-in-the-barracks to find the right way if this political system decides, as it appears to have decided, to batten down the hatches again and find the ways and means to manipulate and cheat the people.

"We are asking for a Constituent Assembly and next year – as I already said – we are going to be pushing this as a short-term strategic solution.

"A sovereign economic model is a long term project; it is a project that will need 20 to 40 years. We do not wish to continue to have a colonial economy, a complementary economic model. This is a project that we have already presented in Venezuela under the name of the Simon Bolivar National Project, but with our arms stretched out to the Latin American continent and to the Caribbean. This is a project in the context of which it is not adventurist to think, politically speaking, of an association of Latin American states. Why not think of that, it was the original dream of our liberators? Why should we continue to be fragmented? In the political arena, that is the scope of this project, which is neither ours nor is it original, it is at least 200 years old.

"Think of how many positive experiences Cuba has in the cultural arena, in the economic arena – in the context of this almost war economy that Cuba is enduring in the sports arena, in the health arena, in the arena of caring for people, for human beings, which is the homeland's first objective, its subject.

"It is in this arena, or in this third element, that of the long-term project of political transformation, that we stretch out our hands to experience, to the men and women of Cuba who have spent years thinking about and working towards this continental project".

"The coming century, in our opinion, is a century of hope; it is our century, it is the century when the Bolivarian dream, Marti's dream, the Latin American dream will be reborn.

"Dear friends, you have honoured me by sitting here tonight to listen to the ideas of a soldier, of a Latin American who is fully and for ever committed to the cause of revolution in this America of ours."

He had a perfectly structured revolutionary political and economic thinking, a coherent thinking in both strategic and tactical terms. Much earlier than one might have thought at that time, the Bolivarian process overthrew the oligarchy in a transparent contest and virtually without resources the Constituent Assembly of which Chavez spoke to us was established. A far-reaching revolution was set in motion in Bolivar's glorious country.

As you can see, he said very candidly in that speech: *"We have not ruled out armed struggle in Venezuela"*. This important subject was something we discussed in the many hours of conversation and exchange of ideas we had during that visit.

The Bolivarian leader preferred to conquer power without spilling blood. He was, however, extremely concerned that the oligarchy would resort to a coup d'état backed by the military top brass to halt the movement set motion by the rebel officers on February 4, 1992. I remember that he said to me: *"Our idea is to avoid difficult situations and bloodshed; our plan is to build alliances between social and political forces, because, in 1998, we could launch a vigorous political campaign with considerable electoral strength, with the support of the people and of broad sectors in the armed forces, and take power in this traditional way. I think that that would be our best strategy"*.

I have not forgotten my laconic but sincere comment: *"That is a good way"*. *

And things happened just as he said they would. In 1998 the Bolivarian movement, an alliance of patriotic forces and of the left built and led by him won a landslide victory in that year's elections with the support of the people and the sympathy and solidarity of a majority in the military, especially the young officers. It was a good lesson for revolutionaries; there are no dogmas nor only one way of doing things. The Cuban Revolution itself was also proof of that.

I have, for a very long time, had the very deeply-held conviction that, when a crisis comes, leaders arise. So Bolivar arose when Napoleon occupied Spain and the imposition of a foreign king created the conditions that facilitated the independence of the Spanish colonies in this hemisphere. So Marti arose when the right moment came for the independence revolution in Cuba. So arose Chavez when the dreadful social and human situation in Venezuela and Latin America determined that the time to fight for the second, real independence had come.

The battle is now harder and more difficult. A hegemonic empire in a globalised world, the only superpower which remains after the cold war and the prolonged conflict between

two radically different political, economic and social ideas, raises an enormous obstacle to the only thing that can today save not only humankind's most basic human rights, but even its very survival. Today the crisis the world is going through does not and cannot affect only one country, a subcontinent or a continent; it affects everyone. Therefore, that imperial system and the economic order it has imposed on the world cannot be sustained. Peoples which have decided to fight, not only for their independence but also for their very survival can never be defeated, even when we are talking of only one people.

It is impossible to ignore what has happened in Cuba over almost half a century, or to ignore the enormous social, cultural, and human advances made by our country in spite of the longest economic blockade known to history. It is impossible to ignore what happened in Vietnam, impossible to ignore what is happening in Iraq today.

What is happening in Venezuela today is another powerful example. Neither the coup d'état, nor the oil coup, nor the revocatory (*recall*) referendum backed by almost all of the media could prevent the Bolivarian movement's landslide victory; it received almost 50 percent more votes for NO on August 15 and had another colossal victory in 23 of the 25 regional governorships, something unprecedented that the world observed with amazement and sympathy. In addition, a battle is being waged about the standards and rules that the empire has imposed to weaken and divide our peoples and impose its rotten, discredited representative democracy.

Because of time constrictions, I shall not speak of other subjects that are very current and important including our Strategic Exercise, Bastion 2004, an expression of the Cuban people's firm decision to struggle, as it has done for 46 years of creativity and struggle. Just allow me to say that on such a historically symbolic and important day as today, which marks the 10th anniversary of Chavez's first meeting with our people, the Republic of Cuba's Council of State has decided to award him a second decoration. He has already been given the Order of Jose Marti, our national hero, who inspired those who, on the hundredth anniversary of his birth, tried to take heaven by storm and started the struggle for the real independence of Cuba.

Marti, who admired Bolivar, who was Bolivarian to the core, to his dying day shared the latter's dream of liberation and union of the countries in Our America: "Everyday I am in danger of giving up my life for my homeland and for my duty – as I understand it and I am in the right frame of mind to do so – of winning Cuba's independence, to prevent the United States from spreading through the Caribbean and then coming down, with all that added strength, on the lands of Our America. Everything I have done so far, and everything I shall do, is for this purpose".

That he wrote a few hours before his death in battle. Jose Marti for us is like a Sucre: in the service of freedom, he achieved with his thought what the Grand Marshall of Ayacucho achieved with his glorious sword. We feel proud to think that in 1959, 63 years after his death, the Cuban revolution was victorious, and his followers carried his ideas as their standard.

Today, to add to the Order of Jose Marti, we bestow on the president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela the Order of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, father of the Homeland, the man who started the first war of independence on October 10, 1868, who, although he owned land and a sugar mill, freed the slaves who worked on both on the very same day as he rose up in arms against Spanish colonialism.

Once Céspedes said of Bolívar's great homeland: "Venezuela, which paved the way to independence for Spanish America and went gloriously down that road until it ended its march in Ayacucho, is our illustrious history teacher." To put the finishing touches on this historic ceremony, which marks exactly ten years from Chavez' first visit to Cuba and from his speech in the Great Hall of the University of Havana, both government's will this night sign a Joint Declaration on the ALBA, that is, the Bolivarian conception of economic integration and will sign a bilateral agreement to begin putting this concept into practice, both of which documents will make history.

Hugo, you said ten years ago that you didn't deserve the honours you were being given by those who, when the news began to reach us of your history, your behaviour and your ideas while you were in prison, in Yare jail, had perceived your qualities of a great revolutionary. Your organizational ability, your teaching skills with young officers, your noble thoughts and steadfastness in adversity have made you worthy of these and of many more honours.

You promised to come back one day with your hope and dreams come true. You have returned and you have returned a giant, now not only as the leader of your people's victorious revolutionary process but also as an important international figure, loved, admired and respected by many millions of people all over the world and especially by our people.

Today the well-deserved honours of which you spoke and the two decorations we have bestowed on you seem rather small. What moves us most is that you have returned, as you promised, to share your Bolivarian and (Marti-inspired) struggles with us.

Long live Bolívar and Martí!

Long live the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela!

Long live Cuba!

May our ties of brotherhood and solidarity last for ever!

*(*Thus ends Fidel Castro's fifth mass public speech in 2004 in defiance of US President Bush's threats of armed intervention against the Cuban Revolution, with a declaration of solidarity with the multifaceted struggle of Latin American sovereignty – Ed.)*